5 Research-Tested Team Motivation Strategies

by Richard E. Clark, EdD, CPT

Motivating a team is often more challenging than motivating a single individual. Individuals within teams operate with different goals, values, beliefs, and expectations. Yet the variety of team member personalities can be a positive force if each performer contributes his or her unique capabilities when and where needed.

Teamwork potentially allows a number of individuals to achieve more when they collaborate than when they work separately. Conversely, team differences are destructive when, for example, prima donnas refuse to cooperate or members loaf because there are more people available to do the job, leaving them feeling less visible.

Most of the suggestions for motivating teams are exactly the same as those suggested for motivating individuals (Clark, 2003, 2004; Clark & Estes, 2002). The goal of this article is to briefly describe five research-tested motivation strategies focused exclusively on the unique qualities of teams.

Team and Motivation

The first critical issue in team motivation is to be clear about the definition of "a team." Nearly everyone who studies teams emphasizes that it is unnecessary to use team motivation strategies when teams are defined as any group of two or more people with similar skills who are simply working together to achieve a common goal (Bandura, 1997). For a team to exist (for motivational purposes), team members must play different roles or bring different skills to the table. Those different skills must be required to achieve team goals. So a team is an interdependent group of individuals, each possessing a different set of skills but who collectively possess all of the skills required to achieve team goals.

For example, while each member of a sports team may have played all of the different "positions" on the team in the past, individuals specialize in the one or two positions where they excel. Since everyone can't play every position during competition, they must depend on each other. This is true in most professions. Lawyers have experience in litigating and negotiating but they tend to specialize in one or the other. Support teams built around litigating include, for example, specialists in jury selection, research on the legal issues involved in a dispute, background investigations, and courtroom strategies.

Many different types of teams are formed within and between organizations for various purposes. Some teams are project based, chosen to respond quickly to rapidly changing conditions and to disband after a project is completed.

Other teams are formed to take advantage of customer-related expertise in different organizations. These networked or virtual teams tend to serve over longer periods of time (depending on their success) and are assembled by brokers who serve as coordinators. Many varieties of these two types of teams exist and each of them present unique motivational challenges and issues for members and managers. The focus of this article is on motivational strategies that appear to work with all teams, regardless of their focus, makeup, or lifespan.

Motivation is the process that energizes our knowledge and skills and focuses us on our most important goals. Motivation has the effect of initiating and sustaining the level of mental and physical effort required to achieve a goal. It "initiates" by converting intention into action and thus helps us to start doing something new or different. Motivation sustains action over time by supporting our persistence at a team task in the face of distractions and other competing work goals. It encourages mental effort when novel work goals require adapting or developing new strategies. The most skilled team in the world will not succeed without adequate motivation (see, for example, Bandura, 1997; Clark & Estes, 2002).

What Motivates Teams?

Teams, like individuals, are motivated by whatever they believe will help them achieve their most important goals. Yet teams must also share some collective beliefs if they are going to be successful. The role of team managers and leaders (or team members in leaderless teams) is to achieve five motivational goals (see Figure 1).

1. Foster mutual respect for the expertise of all team members.
2. Help weaker team members believe that their effort is vital to team success.
3. Support a shared belief in the cooperative capabilities of the team.
4. Hold individual team members accountable for their contributions to the team effort.
5. Direct the team's competitive spirit outside the team and the organization.

Figure 1. Five Motivational Goals.

Foster Mutual Respect for the Expertise of All Members

Teams on which one or more members believe that they are working with people who lack adequate skills to achieve team goals have a major motivational problem. In some cases, this belief is simply incorrect. Highly competitive people sometimes distort the real situation and develop the self-protective view that one or more people on their team are inadequate. Competitive spirit is good. But bolstering self-confidence at the expense of others is immature and destructive. Bandura (1997) describes many studies in a variety of fields where "weak link" doubts about team member expertise have significantly reduced team effectiveness. Even though all team members vary in their expertise levels, when individuals respect and support one another, less-able team members tend to perform significantly better and work hard over time to increase their skills. Since individual team members tend to be self-focused and so think more about their own contributions and ability, team members need to be reminded about the skills of other members. One effective way to accomplish this task is to actively attribute successes to each team member's expertise.

When it is obvious that someone can't measure up and that no amount of "reframing" his or her mistakes will be accepted by the group, the person with inadequate skills must be transferred as soon as possible if team motivation and performance are suffering. What is most important is that team members' confidence in each other's expertise is the only factor that accounts for their success in high pressure situations. Bandura, after a long review of the research on sports teams, concludes that "…in pressure-packed overtime matches where contestants are evenly matched and a mistake brings sudden death defeat… perceived (group) efficacy emerges as the sole determinant of overtime performance" (1997, p. 383). He goes on to suggest that the same is true for all teams that are in competitive situations.

What happens when you can't replace a weak link?

Help Weaker Members Believe That Their Effort Is Vital to Team Success

Occasionally teams must accommodate members who are novices or who for some reason are not able to do the best job for the team. When teams can't replace weaker members, what works best to preserve team motivation? Jackson and LePine (2003) have recent and solid evidence that when team members believe that their weakest member is merely inexperienced or has faltered for some uncontrollable reason (for example, illness, accident, or a family crisis) and can improve, they will give support provided that the person is investing effort to do so.

The biggest motivational challenge on a team is faced by the weakest member. That individual must believe that what he or she contributes to the team is vital to the team's success and that the other members expect him or her to improve and succeed. Feedback to members who are working to improve must emphasize effort, not ability. When they make progress, it is best to attribute the progress to effort. When no progress is forthcoming, they need to be urged to "get busy, get serious and work harder." Avoid attributing success or failure to ability. Belief that performance is due to ability tends to discourage hard work. Why would people

work harder if they believe they can't do it because they lack the ability (or that their achievement was due to ability and not to effort)? When weak team members work hard and gain skills, they need to know that their team appreciates their effort, noticing the result and its impact on the team's progress.

In many teams the motivational challenge is not a weak link, but instead a lack of cooperation and collaboration.

Support a Shared Belief in the Team's Cooperative Capabilities

Healthy teams are made up of team players who cooperate with each other. One uncooperative person can damage the motivation of even the most capable team. The obvious example is the arrogant, self-focused prima donna who invests most of his or her effort trying to look good with managers and clients—at the expense of the team. Less obvious but equally destructive is the outwardly supportive but silently devious back-stabber, whose primarily goal is to make his or her own work highly visible.

How many teams with exceptionally able members fail to achieve their goals because of internal strife? Selecting people with a past history of effective collaboration helps to avoid this problem. Yet very capable people are sometimes constantly competitive and self-focused.

One of the biggest challenges facing team leaders and coaches is to promote a sense that despite differences, when the chips are down, the team will cooperate. Achieving this goal requires the development of a cooperative environment. Debriefing a team after either a success or a stumble should involve a description of the sequence of interactions between members that may have led to a positive or negative outcome. The more that members learn to see that team results are due to interactions between them over time, and not exclusively to their own solitary contributions, the more they will focus on cooperation (Bandura, 1997; Druckman & Bjork, 1994).

Developing cooperative confidence also requires that coaches and team leaders learn to blunt the negative impact when members begin to complain that one of their team is consistently avoiding obvious opportunities to collaborate. Here also it is helpful to attribute successes to each team member's cooperation and attribute selfish missteps or mistakes to temporary lapses, such as a misperception of the situation or to external causes. When it is obvious that someone can't measure up and that no amount of "reframing" his or her mistakes will be accepted by the group, the uncooperative person must be transferred to an individual performance situation if team motivation and performance are suffering.

How is it possible to find out that someone is not measuring up if the team performance is evaluated without assessing the contributions of individual members?

Hold Individual Members Accountable for Contributions to the Team Effort

One of the first team motivation studies (described in Williams, Karau, & Bourgeois, 1993), performed just after the turn of the century, established the principle that has been called "social loafing." When people pulled as hard as possible against a rope connected to a strain gage, their best effort was recorded. When another person was added to the rope and two people pulled together, each person invested less effort in a collaborative effort than he or she did when alone. As more people were added to the rope, each person pulled less forcefully. When interviewed, most people seem unaware that they are not working as hard in a group situation as they did when alone.

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In the past century this phenomenon has been replicated and verified in an amazing range of research studies that represent a broad range of work and educational settings, populations, and tasks, including knowledge work (Williams et al., 1993). The overwhelming evidence for social loafing actually led to early suggestions that people work alone unless teamwork is essential. Recently, a research team found a relatively simple and powerful solution (van Dick, 2001). When the individuals on a team believe that their individual contributions to the team are being accurately and fairly assessed, social loafing seems to completely disappear. Therefore, the advice to all organizations is to always evaluate the contributions of the individual members of a team and make certain that every team member is aware of the evaluation process and results.

The final team motivation strategy is to encourage and focus competitive spirit.

Direct the Team's Competitive Spirit Outside the Team and the Organization

Competition can be highly motivating for individuals or teams. Salespeople seem to thrive on it, and many people who are raised in Western cultural traditions seem to like a bit of it. One of the most common motivational team-building exercises favored by organizational consultants is a field experience where teams compete with other teams to bond and build team spirit. These events are scheduled off site and are ideally held in unfamiliar settings to interrupt habitual patterns formed at work for relating to others. Teams are challenged to do something highly novel, such as build structures or navigate difficult terrain to reach a target sooner or more effectively than other teams. Individuals are asked to notice how hard they are working, how much they are collaborating, and whether they have a real desire to "win."

In general, team-building exercises have been found to be very effective, but they also have a potentially ugly, unintended side effect. Druckman & Bjork (1994) reviewed all studies of team building for the US National Academy of Sciences. The variety of team-building methods shared the common goal of attempting to get members of work teams to bond, collaborate, and work efficiently toward common goals by competing with other teams. The researchers concluded that many different approaches worked, but they were surprised to find that after team-building exercises, a significant number of teams were competing in a nearly suicidal fashion with other teams in their own organization. Stories include misguided team members who were found to be modifying or deleting the electronic files, intentionally "misplacing" or rerouting team resources, and spreading negative rumors about members of other teams in their organizations. Apparently, fostering constant, intense rivalry can help when it is directed at the organization's competition, but it can also engender a destructive level of internal competition and focus attention and energy away from organizational goals. The obvious motivational issue in this situation is to make certain that team-building exercises focus the team's competitive energy on competing organizations—not on other teams within the same organization.

Summary

Teams are defined as collections of individuals with different skill sets working together to achieve goals that require members to collaboratively apply their different skills. Collections of individuals with similar skills who tackle problems do not require team motivation strategies. In addition to motivational strategies that work with individuals, interdependent teams are most motivated when they trust both the expertise and collaborativeness of other team members as well as the determination of weaker members on their team to invest maximum effort to build their expertise. In addition, team members must believe that their own contributions to the team effort are being constantly and fairly evaluated along with the performance of the entire team. Finally, team competitiveness must be focused on opposing organizations that are struggling for the same customer base, not on teams in their own organization.

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